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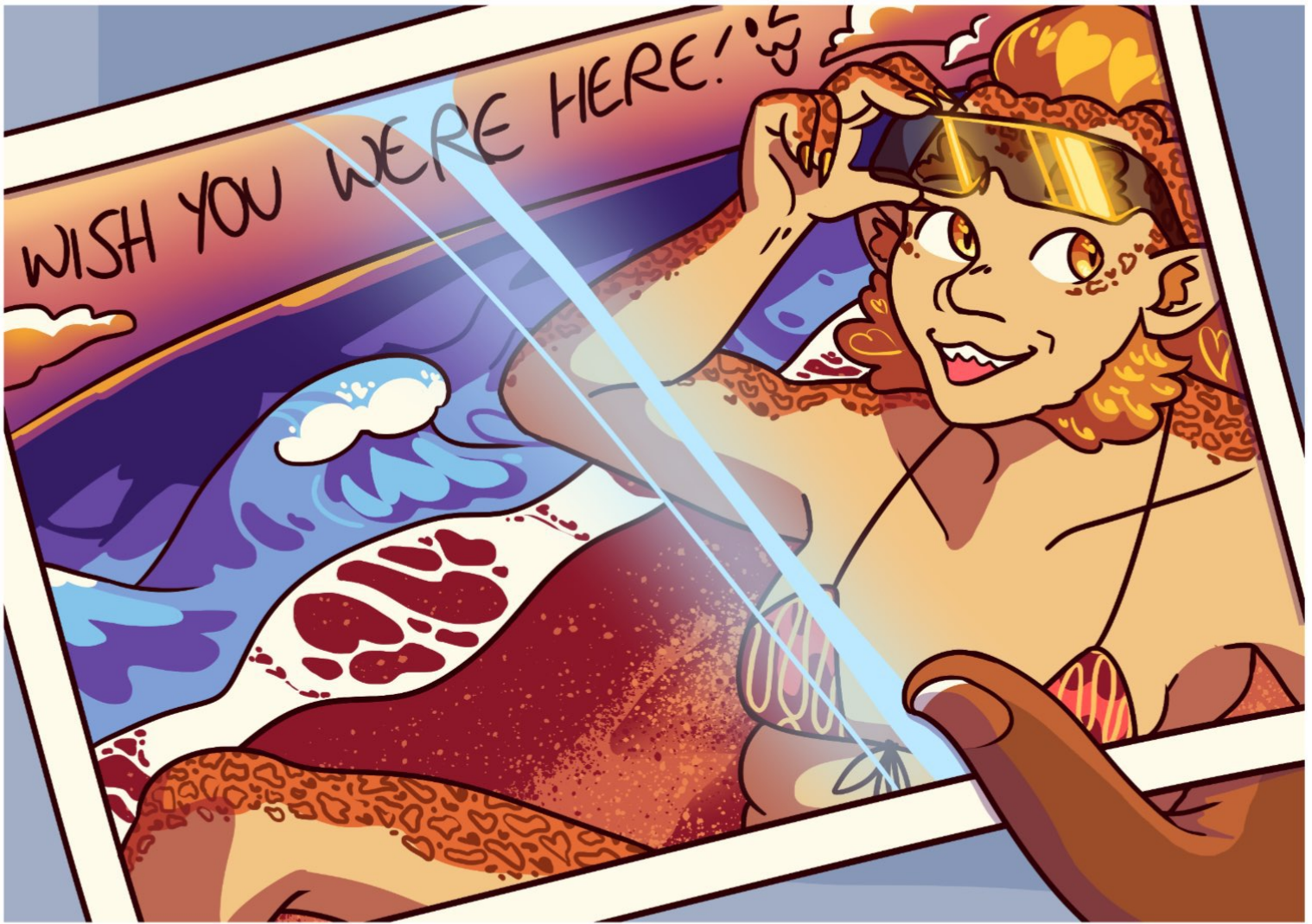


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Games

by Falspar

It was one hell of a beach party, that was for sure.

After the collapse of the Emerald Chain, *Discovery* had resumed business as usual for all of two weeks before Admiral Vance had called her senior staff together along with the dead-eyed Dr. Kovich who told them in no uncertain terms that they needed to take a real vacation before they had psychological breakdowns.

Xanthalga 2 was chosen for fulfilling the most vital criteria; safe, remote, populated by a species friendly to outsiders, and full of diversions. The Xanthalgans ran a tight ship — or a tight planet, as it were — but their rules centered around the safety of their guests and respect for the planet and its inhabitants, which was reasonable enough. It was actually a rather exclusive vacation spot, but Admiral Vance had a considerable amount of pull and had scored a week of shore leave for the entire crew of *Discovery*.

Even Michael agreed they could use a break, which was possibly the most telling of all.

Some crew members were hesitant at first about the unfamiliar location, looking over their shoulders and expecting some disaster to strike. Tilly didn't bother worrying. Either a disaster was going to happen or it wasn't, and until some alien strike force beamed down and started shooting she was going to enjoy her vacation.

She started off slow, getting absolutely shitfaced the first night and sharing a stranger's bed. Once she got over her hangover the next day she considered the pamphlets on cave tours, recreational fishing, and underwater dance competitions before she decided to do absolutely nothing at all. Satisfied, she spent the whole day lazing around on the beach under an umbrella, watching the waves and the strange bird-bats that scooped up fish in their long jaws. She ended up falling asleep, waking up to the sounds of music. Curious, she followed it down the beach and ended up stumbling across a music competition which ended up providing that night's entertainment as well as drinks.

She spent most of the night at the music competition and so was still sleeping when a chime woke her up. Disoriented, Tilly blinked up at the ceiling. The chime came again. Someone was at her door.

"Come in!" Tilly yelled, hurrying to put on a bathrobe and some slippers before realizing she was on vacation and slowing down. If it was urgent they would have said so, right?

She entered the kitchenette to find none other than Michael Burnham, sipping on some coffee serenely.

"Captain!" She gave a little salute and giggled. "Michael! Hey! What's up?"

"You turned your communicator off." The words and the neutral tone could be read as accusing, but Tilly knew it was just Michael's way of questioning her unusual behavior.

"Yeah. Usually I keep up with the gossip and the alerts and the look-what-I'm-doing but I'm trying out different things now. So I decided to take this week just as me-time and not deal with all the chatter. I tried reading a bit too, but then that just got me thinking about all the engineering I still had to catch up on and how I should be doing that instead, so I've mostly been beach watching. You're welcome to join me, of course, we could have some us-time. We should go to the swim-up bar! The bartender's really cute, and they've got this cocktail that I think might have a mild hallucinogenic?"

Michael laughed in the way that made her face blossom.

"I was worried you were isolating yourself. I'm glad you've been having fun."

"I hope you've been enjoying yourself too, and not just checking in on everyone."

Tilly said sternly.

"Don't you worry." Michael gave a wicked grin. "I've been having a great time."

"Where's Book?"

"He's around. Did you go on a cave tour yet?"

"No, actually, I decided it sounded like too much work. I'm really committed to being lazy on this vacation." Tilly poured herself a cup of the same nut-based coffee Michael was drinking.

"Well, since you've got your communicator off, I came here in person to let you know that we're having a beach volleyball match this afternoon. You're invited, of course."

"Oh, I'm not going to play." Tilly said almost before Michael had finished talking. "I get really competitive, and then I get super upset if I lose, and it's a whole thing. I'm worse than Keyla."

Michael raised her eyebrows. "You're invited anyways." She started diplomatically. "Everyone misses you. If you just want to watch, and maybe cheer us on... I'm sure they would appreciate seeing your face again."

"What, just because I turned my communicator off for a day and a half everyone thinks I died?"

"Someone may have had to talk me out of organizing a rescue mission." Michael admitted, not looking up from her cup.

"Michael!" Tilly held her sides and laughed. "You didn't!"

"Correct. I did not." Michael gave a half-smile. "Because I was persuaded otherwise."

And so Tilly found herself walking down the beach over to where a volleyball net was set up.

"This is pointless."

Tilly looked to the disgruntled man next to her and smiled.

"Hi, Commander. Enjoying your vacation?"

"Well, I *was*, until I was dragged into a volleyball game."

"You've got to be the only human alive who doesn't like volleyball." Tilly had fond memories of playing it in the Academy. Or rather, fond memories of picking up cute guys who played.

"I don't know why Hugh likes it so much." Paul whined, squinting towards the activity. "It's just another old Earth sport."

"Indeed. I am most curious to try it out." Tilly looked over and did a double-take to see none other than Saru standing next to her, dressed in what could only be vacation wear. That was a *lot* of plaid.

"Saru? When did you get here?" Tilly asked. Saru drew himself up to his full height and nodded seriously at her.

"That is a very interesting tale, Tilly. I was first invited by--"

Tilly never got to hear the end of that particular story, because at that moment Michael yelled out "TEAMS! EVERYONE GET INTO TEAMS NOW. NON-PLAYERS GET OFF THE FIELD."

Adira immediately raised their hand, eyes wide. "Referee."

Saru drifted off to join the game, leaving Tilly and Paul standing next to each

other. They watched the hubbub start to organize itself, leaving two teams — Dr. Culber, Saru, and Rhys on one side, Michael, Joann, and Keyla on the other.

“Girls versus boys!” Tilly said.

“Only because I’m not allowed to play.” A familiar voice said behind Tilly.

“Book, good to see you — oh my God, what happened to you?” Book smiled at her, waving with the hand that wasn’t immobilized in thick white bandages. The left side of his face was covered in unnatural purple and yellow rashes that extended down his neck and under his shirt.

“Cave tour. You should try one.”

“I think I’m good, actually. Is that, um, permanent?”

“It’ll go away in a couple of days.”

“Guys, come on. Watch the game.” Paul said just as a cheer and a groan went up from the volleyball court.

“One point to left!” Adira yelled, holding up an authoritative finger. Keyla and Joann high-fived, while Hugh crossed his arms.

“You’ve got this, Hugh!” Paul cupped his hands to his mouth and yelled. Hugh smiled.

“Dragged into the game, huh?” Tilly blew some hair out of her face and looked at Paul with amusement.

“Come on Michael!” Book called. Michael screwed up her face, determined.

They stood in their places for a long moment, both teams making long eye contact. Michael gave the most subtle of head tilts, and then Keyla served explosively. Play had begun.

Hugh leapt to intercept, twisting through the air with the brutal grace of a shark through water. He smacked the ball with his open palm and sent it hurtling directly towards the dirt on the other side of the net. Keyla sprang to catch it, a controlled fall sending her knees scraping through the sand in a way that made Tilly wince in sympathy. She leaned all the way forwards to bump the ball upwards with both wrists, the force of the impact sending her arms into the ground. The ball seemed to float into the air, twirling with redirected energy.

This was Joann’s hour. As if in slow motion Tilly watched her fully jump over Keyla, hand coming back to spike. If Hugh was a shark, sleek and efficient power set into motion, Joann was a fucking bear. Mouth open in a war cry she spiked the ball with the force of a sledgehammer. Tilly half expected the cover to explode off the ball. The ball flew with deadly speed to the other side, where Saru had already dodged out of the way of the missile. The impact sent sand flying, the boys covering their eyes protectively. Tilly looked over to Adira, who was wearing the same expression she had.

“Holy shit. Uh, point to the left.”

Michael gave a grin that deserved to be dripping with blood. “That all you’ve got?”

“You wish.” Rhys said, eyes narrowed.

Keyla glanced at Joann for a halfsecond then served. Tilly tried to think about what animal Keyla would be but she got distracted.

“Saru!” Hugh bumped the ball. Saru extended his long, thin arms and sent it flying with delicate precision. Michael took a step back and returned the volley.

The volley continued for a while, play getting more and more fast-paced and frantic. Finally Rhys flung up his arms and set the ball, Hugh moving in and spiking it. It

smacked into the ground a centimetre in front of Michaels outstretched hands. In unison both sides roared.

"Point to the right." Adira said when the noise stopped.

"I'm worried what Keyla will do if the girls lose." Tilly said, watching the woman in question grit her teeth in a snarl. *Wolf*, she decided.

"Michael won't lose." Book said with an awful lot of confidence for someone who had just lost a fight with a cave.

Play continued, each team moving with desperation more fitting of a Klingon battle than a beach volleyball game. Tilly clapped and cheered for both teams, hyping them up as Paul yelled encouraging things for Hugh's side and Book cheered for Michael. Even Saru got aggressive, using his hooves to dash over the sand faster than the humans, reaching out a long Kelpian arm to smack the ball when Joann tried to redirect it.

The game was neck-and-neck. The score was twenty-twenty, the three cheerleaders watching with bated breath. Both teams were panting and pouring sweat as they baked under the hot sun. This was no longer about volleyball. This was war. Tilly half expected Keyla to start pawing the ground and snorting. Adira had broken out a small blue umbrella which they held over their head for shade. They watched excitedly as the players recovered. Saru served, sending the ball nearly to the end of the court area. Michael was ready, though, and bumped it forward to Keyla who sent it over the net. Tilly watched as the ball moved back and forth, players hitting the ground more than once to keep the ball in play. At one point Hugh did a spike that Tilly was sure had won the game, until there was a meaty *thwack* and the ball soared up into the air, spinning wildly. Michael jumped to send it back over to the other side. Saru and Michael were doing the most legwork, running around the back of the court to keep the ball from going out of bounds. Joann and Rhys stayed in the middle of the court, setting up the ball for their teammates. And Keyla and Hugh were right up front, trying their best to kill each other with the volleyball.

When it finally happened it was a surprise. Joann bumped the ball backwards, Michael hitting it overhand. It barely scraped over the top of the net and skidded into the dirt under Hugh's outstretched hands.

The court exploded. Joann whooped and hauled Michael to on top of her shoulders as the women cheered. Rhys looked sour until Hugh laughed and clapped him on the back, saying something Tilly couldn't hear over Keyla's defiant scream. Saru looked down at the ball, disappointment etched on his alien face, before picking it up and giving it to Michael with gravity.

Book was smiling the way he did with his eyes. Paul had already gone over to Hugh to give him a consolatory kiss which Hugh was returning *very* enthusiastically. Wow. Joann had released Michael from her shoulders and was caught in animated chatter with Keyla. Adira was looking at something no one else could see, the adoration clear in their eyes. Tilly's gaze wandered over to Michael and she smiled. The look of joy Michael gave to Book was something new to Tilly, and it still took her breath away every time she saw it, making something in her ache that she missed the year that changed Michael in so many ways.

Saru sidled up to her. He gave her a nod, which Tilly returned respectfully.

"What did you think of the game?"

"Exciting. Glad I came and watched. You guys all did a great job."

“A most interesting sport. It reminds me of something I used to play on Kaminar with my sister.”

“Things keep changing, huh?” Tilly said softly. She looked over to Paul, who was saying something to Adira. Not too long ago he would be focusing the same attention on Tilly. She felt both too old and too young at that moment.

“And yet they keep staying the same.” Saru said with a smile on the very edge of his words. He was looking at Joann and Keyla.

They spent a moment in silence, watching the others.

“Alright.” Tilly cupped her hands around her mouth. “HEY! Who wants drinks?”

A cheer rose from the players. Tilly smiled at Saru.

“Shall we?”

“I believe we shall.”



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Jonathan Archer SPILLS ALL!!!

by Falspar

Ever wonder what the Captain of the Enterprise has on his mind? Well, wonder no more, Archer fans, because for the first time we've got all the spicy info you're looking for. From water polo to cheddar cheese, Jonathan Archer lays it all out for us in an EXCLUSIVE interview only for the summer edition of The Star Trek Swimsuit Special. This interview was conducted by reporter Evelyn Nesbit and edited by Fred Astaire.

Evelyn Nesbit: So, Captain.

Jonathan Archer: Please, call me Jonathan.

EN: So, Jon. A lot of people know you as the hero of the Xindi crisis, or as the leader of Earth's first Warp Five capable ship. But there's more to every story. What can you tell us about being Jonathan Archer?

JA: Well, my friends might tell you I'm actually pretty boring. I love dogs. I've never been without a beagle. I grew up in San Francisco. Oh! I'm a big fan of water polo. A lot of people don't know that about me, but my friends would probably say it's my biggest hobby.

EN: Oh, wow. That sure is obscure.

JA: Not really. It's the eleventh largest collegiate sport, and it's played in a lot of places. Did you know about the history of water polo? (Some of answer edited for brevity) I understand it's not as popular as some newer sports. It's an interesting sport, though.

EN: Wow. That was very informative. Thank you. Alright, next question. What would you say is your best quality?

JA: To be honest, that's the sort of evaluation I'd leave to my first officer. (Laughter) I think she'd be able to give the best answer. But if I had to answer, I think I would say that I'm always willing to see things through. Space is a very large place, a very strange place, and I'd like to say that diplomacy always gets the best results. But that's just not always the case. Sometimes it just gets you into a big mess. The important thing, though, is being able to get out of that mess. Just because I'm in a bad situation doesn't mean I can give up. A lot of people are counting on me. So I do my best to see things through. I haven't found a tight situation I can't get out of yet.

EN: That's very inspiring. I'm sure your crew has a lot of faith in you.

JA: I'd like to think so, yes. Maybe some more than others.

EN: So, moving on. You're very popular on Earth, but I have to tell you there's someone who's got an even bigger fanbase.

JA: That's fine, I really didn't ask for any-

EN: It's Porthos! The first beagle to step foot on an alien planet, and the cutest member of the Enterprise. Except for your chief of engineering, of course. Yum.

JA: I'd appreciate it if you didn't talk about Trip that way.

EN: Anyways. Everyone loves Porthos. What's it like having a dog in space?

JA: Well, it's a bit like having a dog on Earth, except a little more time indoors. A lot of unknown dangers. Unknown excitements, too. Sometimes I wish I could see the worlds we visit through his eyes.

EN: That's nice. And what's the most notable planet you've visited?

JA: It's a pretty good life, as a dog. He's never had to deal with crabby diplomats, or make decisions that would put lives at risks. He just gets to enjoy seeing new places. He even gets to chase rabbits, sometimes. Well, the alien equivalent at least.

EN: What are you looking forward to in the next five-year mission?

JA: I mean, sometimes he gets in trouble too. But that's not his fault, he's just a dog! How were we supposed to know that their trees were sacred? It's ridiculous that I get blamed when they were just as much at fault. You know, I make mistakes, but I always have the decency to own up to them. These guys, though. (Some of answer edited for potential insensitivity)

EN: Um. Wow. You sure love Porthos a lot. How do you like to play with him?

JA: Oh, you know. Tug of war. Tennis balls. He goes bonkers for cheddar cheese. I try not to give him too much, though, it makes him fart. He looks at me with those big beagle eyes, though, and I can't help it. He's smart, you know. He knows my weakness.

EN: That's sweet. It's important to care about animals. I can see why you were chosen for this mission.

JA: Why's that?

EN: You've got a big heart.

JA: Thank you.

EN: Speaking of your heart...

JA: Oh, boy.

EN: I have to ask. Are you seeing anybody currently?

JA: Hm. I'm going to have to say no. It's hard, making those kinds of connections when you spend so much time in space. Nobody likes long-distance relationships.

EN: We've heard rumors that you and a certain Andorian run into each other a lot.

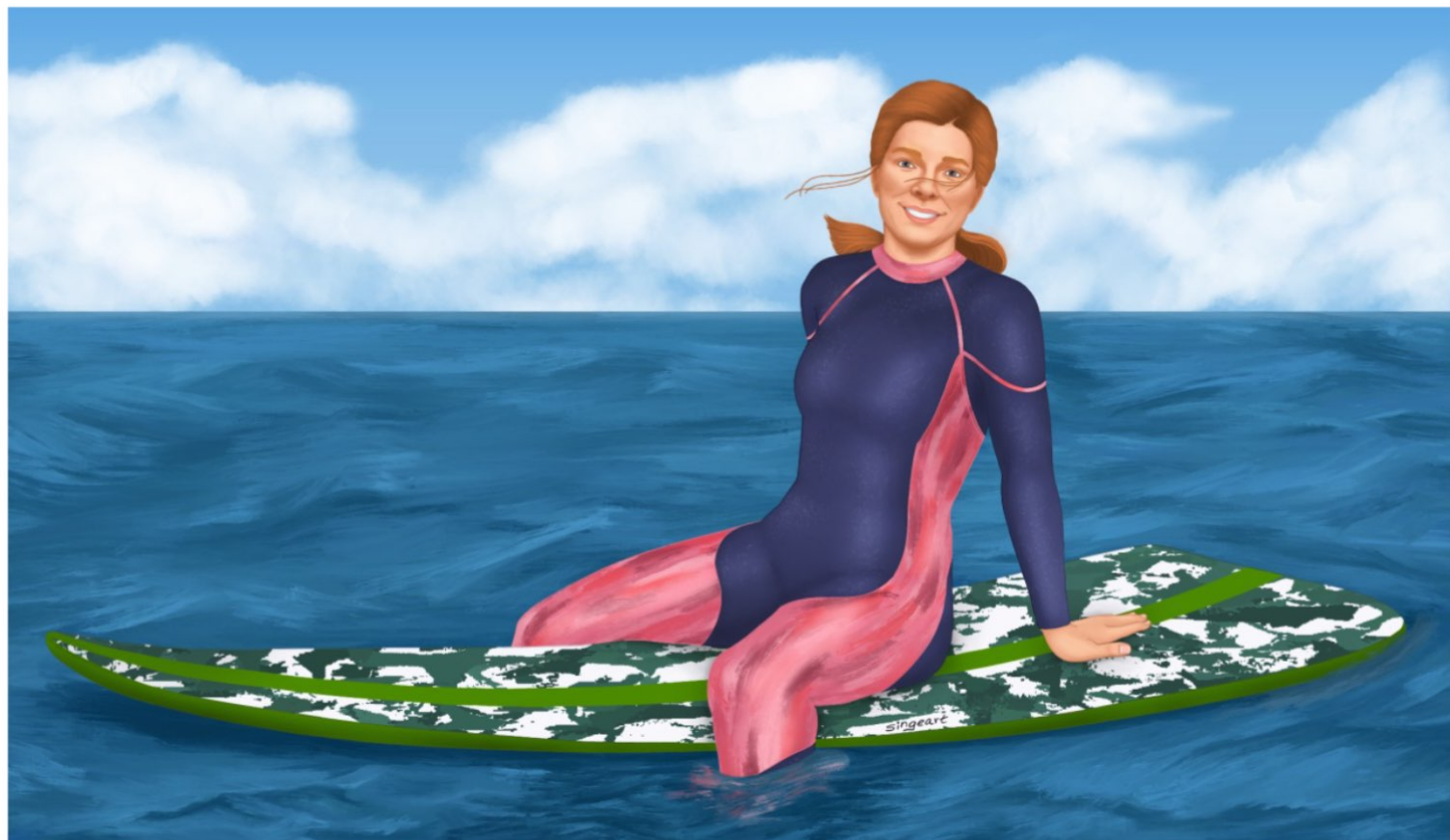
JA: Shran? Well, I suppose so. But I wouldn't say it's like that. It's... it's complicated. We've done each other a lot of favors, and I think at this point it's turning into a game of chicken. I mean, I'm willing to just be friends with the guy, but he seems to think I'm not interested in talking to him unless he's got some sort of game to play. Hey, that sounds weird. Don't publish that.

EN: Thank you so much for your time, Jon.

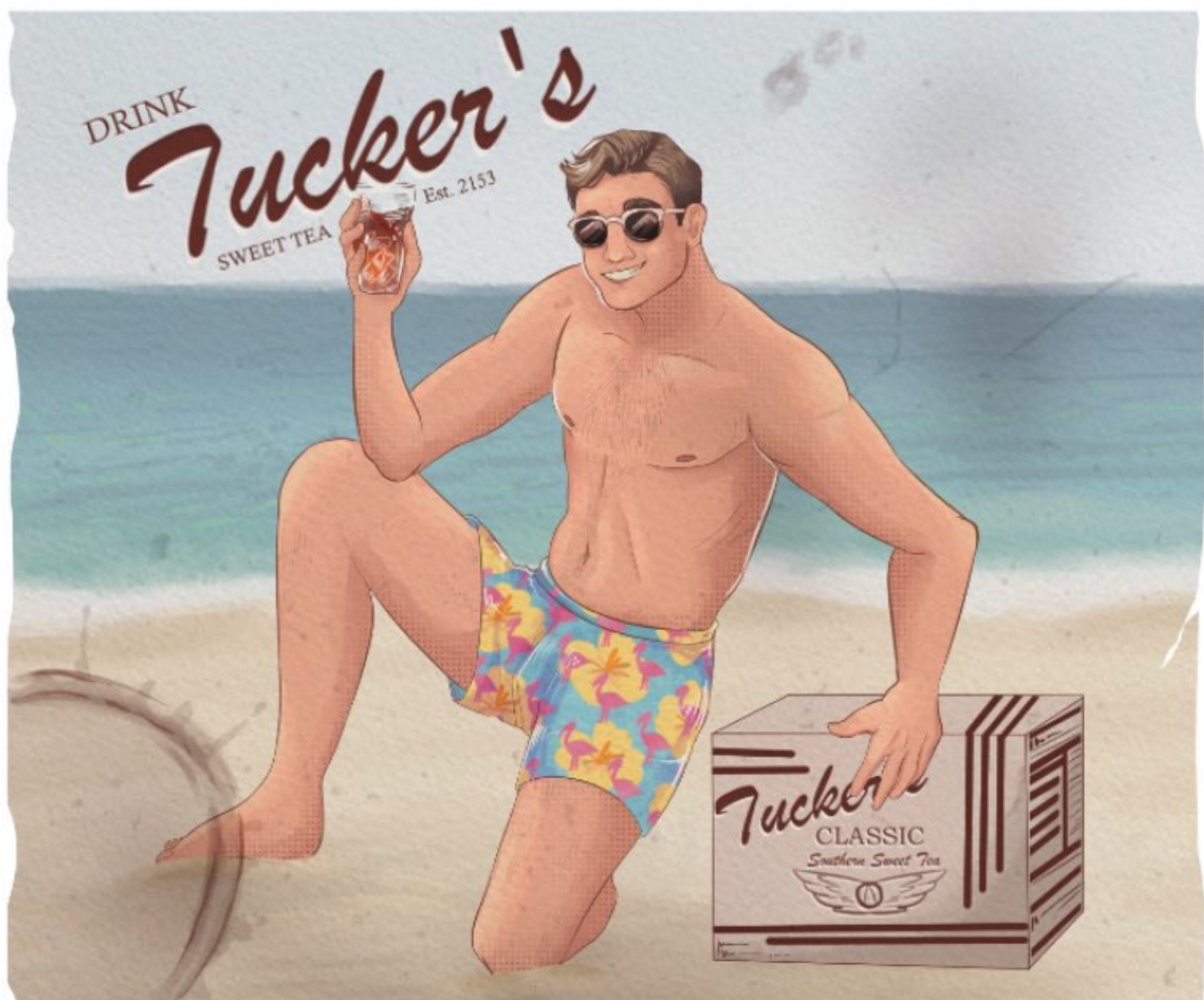
JA: It's been a pleasure, Evelyn.

Wow! What an exciting interview! We hope we've answered some of your burning questions about Captain Jonathan Archer in our EXCLUSIVE interview. Remember to subscribe to the Star Trek Swimsuit Special for more EXCITING news every week, brought to you by our amazing publicity team.

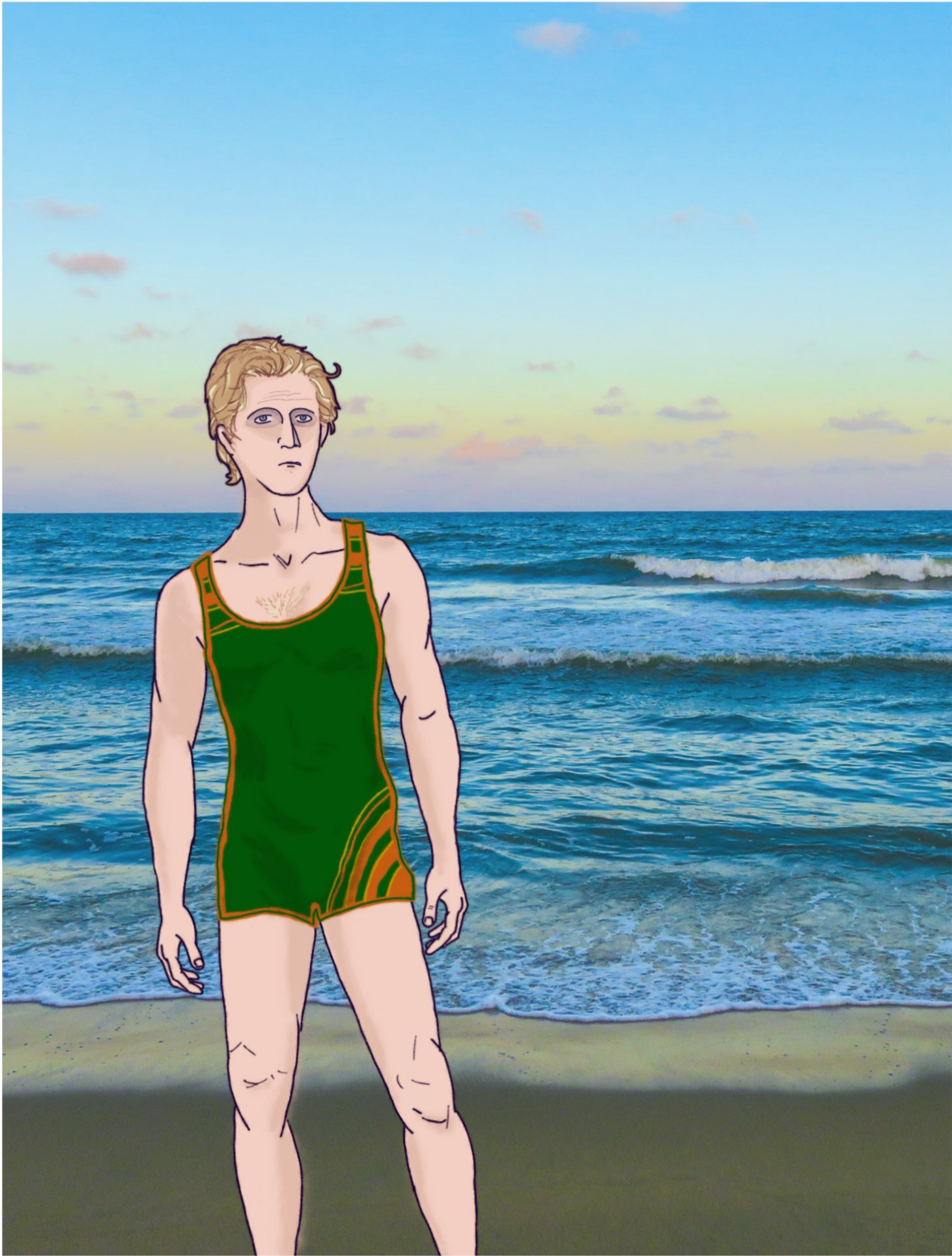
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